The Tale of Sir Fratley

NaomiKindle

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Summary

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Description:

"I climbed the highest mountains only to hear rumors of your victories. I searched the deepest valleys, only to find your footsteps. But I never found you. And in the end, I heard something...something unbearable!" What did Sir Fratley encounter on his journey, and how did he come to remember nothing of his past Full summary/details inside. Not a pairing for Beatrix/Fratley.

1. Prologue: Endearment

Author's Notes: As much as I adore the story of Final Fantasy IX, there was one thing that always struck me: why *did* Fratley have no recollection of his past? After many times of playing through and reading up on the content, and frankly the wikia page is largely disappointing. Thus, a fanfiction was needed. As always, reviews make it update sooner. Enjoy!

Notes Before the Story:

Full Summary: "I climbed the highest mountains only to hear rumors of your victories. I searched the deepest valleys, only to find your footsteps. But I never found you. And in the end, I heard something… something unbearable!" Five years prior to the kidnapping of Princess Garnet, Sir Fratley left his home of Burmecia to test his skills to ensure he could protect his kingdom and maintain its peaceful prosperity. And yet… something went awry. What did Sir Fratley encounter on his journey, and how did he come to remember nothing of his past?

Setting/Pairings: Set beginning five years prior to the game and takes place over those five years, ending months before the game occurs. Freya/Fratley is the only pairing.

Disclaimer: I, sadly, do not own any of the characters or themes of Final Fantasy IX and make no profit from writing my ideas.

Prologue:
Endearment

"Beatrix?" she asks, curiosity laced between the syllables.

"Yes, Beatrix," I reply, gazing the length of my spear. "I hear there are many fierce warriors out in the world — some more powerful than even I… Beatrix of Alexandria, in particular. They say her swordsmanship is the best in the land."

"Sir Fratley," she pleads, "do you still insist on going on your journey?"

"Yes," I say. Her head falls, hanging sadly beneath her helm. 'Please understand, Freya. Right now,Burmecia is at peace, while other nations are slowly but surely gaining power.' She says nothing,

and I sigh, not wanting to admit the truth. “I don’t know if my spear alone is enough to protect Burmecia.” She looks up, eyes determined, and gets ready to protest; I continue. “…Which is precisely why I must go out into the world.”

“Sir Fratley, I do not think I can live on my own,” she begins, green eyes watering beneath thin white strands of bangs. “Not without you.”

“Freya, you’re going to be fine,” I assure her with a soft smile. ‘Trust your strength… and have faith in your destiny.’ With sorrow, her head hangs again, and I know she is attempting to hide her tears. “Once I complete my journey around the world, I will return to Burmecia.” She is quiet for a moment, hesitant to accept my decision. After a moment, her eyes lift from the floor to meet my own.

“Then promise me, one more time, that you *will* return,” she asks of me. She is determined, her eyes fierce and her stance unwavering despite her uncertainty. She is strong, I remind myself.

“I promise,” I reply without hesitance. With one last smile, I turn from my love, ready to take my leave from my kingdom. I hear a stifled sob behind me, but I do not stop. She is strong. And it is for her sake that I must know if I can protect Burmecia. I

quietly leave the palace, passing through the still town. Voices speak nearby, cheerful and pleasant in the rain. Turning the corner, I see several of my comrades by the fountain. Noticing me, they wave.

“You’re off then?” Dan asks as the other takes his leave.

“So it would seem,” I reply, a slight touch of sorrow hidden in the phrase.

“How’d she take it?” he queries.

“As one might expect,” I say, remembering the heartbreak of my love as I turned my back to her at the palace gate. “Might I ask a favor of you?”

“Of course,” Dan replies eagerly. “Anything.”

“Take care of her in my absence,” I say, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. “I know she is strong, and yet sorrow ensues. Keep her safe during this time of uncertainty, and soon I will return to her.”

“She *is* strong, Fratley,” Dan replies. “She’ll be alright. I doubt she needs a watchful eye. But rest assured, I will watch over her. And upon your return, she’ll be safe, and waiting for you.”

“I know I can count on you, comrade,” I say, my hand falling from his shoulder. I turn from him, feet

sloshing in the standing puddles as I make my way to the edge of town. Nodding to the guards, I pass through the gates of Burmecia, not looking back to the fading city.

2. The Challenge

Author's Note: No reviews? Sad face. Reviews make me update faster! ;)

Chapter One:
The Challenge

At the least, the trek to Alexandria will take several weeks on foot. But the ravenous fiends of the Mist are decent practice. Part of me worries as I come closer to the kingdom, unsure of whether my blade will be stronger than the General's. I long to return — to my beloved, to my kingdom. And yet, I know I must face this challenge. I cannot fear, or look back. The fear of failure cannot stifle me.

I sit upon a rock by the nearby stream. It rushes past, eroding the bank and smoothing the rocks beneath its surface. A cool breeze blows a mist across my face, the water cold against the morning air. From my pack, I pull a piece of stationary and a quill and ink. Eyes close against the foggy sky, and I take in a deep breath. The plush griffin feather dips into the ink, stirring the surface ever so slightly as it

sinks. I lift it again, the once white tip now deep soot black. It scratches across the stationary, words forming at its tip:

Freya —

It has been a week since my departure. I hope you are well, though I know I needn't worry on your behalf. All is well, as of now, my only challenges coming from the Mist monsters. I have passed through the North Gate, and now make my way through the land below the Mist. I approach the Ice Cavern as I speak, in hopes of bartering a ride a cargo ship. Alexandria is not far beyond my sight, only the Mist now shrouding it.

My blade shall truly be tested in the coming days. Once I have succeeded in my challenge, I will return to you, my love.

Until then,

Fratley —

It is short, but I am uncertain of what else to add. I fold the parchment carefully, placing it in the pocket just inside my coat. I lift my spear from the soggy earth, sheathing it behind my back. The river flows southward from Alexandria, and I follow it downstream. Crawling through the Evil Forest

would be meaningless — the cliffs scale too steeply upwards to climb to Alexandria. Following the river south, I finally reach the Ice Cavern. A frozen cave of shimmering beauty and glass walls. It climbs upward, winding through the mountainside.

When I exit, the sun shines down, warming cold skin. Nearby, I can see the small village of Dali. To the other side, the tall gates towers over the cliff side. I approach, and the guard lets me pass. A vendor sits eagerly behind her post and I approach her. She yields supplies; none I need. I pull the letter from by pocket, and a reasonable stash of Gil.

“Could you ensure this letter reaches Burmecia?” I ask. She nods, accepting the letter and tip. She places it aside, in a stack of papers awaiting sending.

“A Moogle comes tomorrow,” she says. “He can deliver it.” I nod, quietly, and she smiles assuredly. I pass through the gate once more, crossing the lush fields to the neighboring village of Dali. Around the village, men work in the fields, plow tilling dirt and preparing the earth for a new season. A little ways away from the edge of the fields, a cargo ship sits quietly waiting for departure as crew loads a few bails of grain.

“Are you the captain?” I ask a gentleman as he gestures for one of the men to get one of the items. He turns, thick fingers scratching a burly beard.

“That’d be right,” he says. “Don’t drop those supplies!” he adds over my shoulder before looking back to me.

“This cargo ship, does it venture to Alexandria?” I query, and he nods.

“Righ’ to the castle,” he replies. ‘You lookin’ for a ride?’ I nod, and his heavy laugh bellows. “Well, we can arrange tha’ — so long as ya don’t mind workin’.”

“You have my gratitude,” I smile, and he points to a stack of barrels near the field.

“Those need ta be loaded,” he says. “Don’ matter where, so long as they get on there.” I nod, passing him as I cross to the stack of barrels. They smell of mead, and they are heavy. But the labor will be worth the transportation.

Alexandria, and General Beatrix — I shall face you soon.

The town of Alexandria bustles with business, the city dwellers going about their daily business in an absent-minded hurry. In the town square, the ticket booth is lined with impatient customers that tap their feet as they wait for their turn. I cross the square and pass the busy weapons shop, heading for a small archway. A white brick path opens into a circle, and Alexandrian soldiers stand on either side of the stairway that leads to the waterway. Eyes scan me as the guard speaks.

“State your name and business,” she says coolly.

“Sir Fratley of Burmecia,” I reply. “I wish to see General Beatrix of Alexandria.” The blond looks to the other dark-haired guard, who nods.

“Take the boat across,” she says in a nasally voice. “Captain Steiner will address the matter.” I bow my head and proceed onto the ornately decorated boat. Wordlessly, a third soldier paddles the short distance across. I thank her, and she waits wordlessly as I head for the on my right stairs. Clanking fills the air, metal clattering against metal, and I stop.

“What is your business here?” the suited knight demands as he runs toward me.

“I seek audience with General Beatrix of Alexandria,” I request humbly.

“For what purpose?” he asks suspiciously.

“That, good knight, is a matter I wish to only discuss with the general,” I reply, unsure of how such an anxious guard would respond to my true request. “Perhaps you could kindly lead me to her?”

“I’ll do no such thing!” he shouts. “I am Adelbert Steiner, Captain of the Knights of Pluto. You honestly expect me to —”

“Allow me to handle the situation?” a feminine voice interrupted, soft but stern. We both look to the top of the nearby fountain. Long chestnut locks sweep downward, curls swaying slightly in the cool breeze. An armored hand brushes through them, lifting bangs above bright maroon irises. “Why, yes. I do, Captain,” she says wittily. The man stutters for a moment, but decides his protest is invalid. Without another word to me or the general, he skulks away, armor clanking loudly as he crosses the courtyard.

“What is your business with me, Burmecian?” she asks. A hand rests sassily on her hip, and she shifts her weight.

“General Beatrix, it is truly an honor,” I bow my helm generously. She takes my hand, and we shake in a friendly gesture. “Odd as it may sound, I am here to challenge your swordsmanship.”

“You want to challenge me?” she asks with slight surprise. “What reason do you have?”

“I must know that my blade can protect my home,” I reply. “Your skills are acclaimed throughout the land, so I wish to test my own against yours.” She hesitates, burgundy eyes studying me.

“What is your name, Burmecian?” she asks with curiosity.

“Sir Fratley, Dragon Knight of Burmecia,” I reply humbly. She smiles, and her hand falls. Swaying slightly as she shifts her weight, it lands on the hilt of her sword. The trusted ‘Save the Queen.’

“Well, Sir Fratley,” she says with a slight smile. ‘I’ll accept your challenge.’ The sword whispers loudly as it is released, gleaming in the warm sunlight. The steel is embellished with rubies and crested with diamond to strengthen the weapon. The hilt is ornately crafted, and more beautiful than the weapon I once heard of. I pull the spear from my

back mount, and it cuts through the air as I ready it. “Let us begin!”

At once, light flashes across metal as she takes the initiative. Screeching, my blade meets hers, and forces it aside. I focus my energy and light bursts before me; a Burmecian crest forms below her and smoke rises from the ground. The attack subsides, and she sways from the unexpected skill. Seeing her opening, I race rapidly toward her, blade lunging forward. Her eyes flash, and she rolls from the attack, steel scraping concrete. A wind shifts in the air, and the distant scent of sea-salt settles around the scene. The grass sways around her, and I race towards her once more. She matches me, her blade shines suddenly as it slices nearer.

‘*For the sake of my country… for the sake of Freya, I cannot lose this match!’*

I leap into the air and fall, plunging my spear downward. Back-flipping out of the way, she gracefully lands atop the fountain. I curse to myself, turning sharply. She uses that vantage point, and the rubies begin to glow. Orange light emits from the sword, and it slashes downward. Unable to dodge, the attack hits. I fall backwards, and a smirk crosses her lips. I leap forth and she meets my blade in

midair, nullifying my attack. We both land on sun-warmed concrete, a fresh spray blowing from the pouring fountain.

“You’re legendary skills aren’t disappointing,” I say as our weapons clash once more. She smiles and her eyes glisten. She breaks from the deflection, and leaps into the sunlight. I shade my eyes, and suddenly her silhouette dives towards me. Unable to defend, I fall beneath her weight. Diamonds in the steel flicker against my chest, and our eyes briefly meet. The weight lifts from my chest as she stands aside, and her weapon hisses as it is sheathed. An armored hand reaches downward, and I grasp it firmly as she lifts me from the dusty cement.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she says warmly. “Your skills are impressive.”

“I thank you for your time, General,” I reply. Shame is laced within my acceptance; I have failed.

“You should be proud and confident in your skills, Sir Fratley,” she says, placing a heavy hand on my shoulder. Eyes meet, and a smile gleams in her gaze. “It has been too long since I’ve faced such a challenging opponent. I have no doubt that you could defend your Burmecia.” I return her tender smile and nod.

“Then I will challenge you again, one day,” I say. “And I will once more test my skills against those of the legendary General of Alexandria.”

“I shall look forward to it,” she replies. “Good luck on your journeys, Sir Fratley.” I nod proudly, and bow my head to my superior. I turn and cross the path, down the stairs, and to the boat. Eyes never gaze back to the gleaming sword that cuts through the castle of Alexandria, gleaming warmly in the orange sunset.

3. Festival of the Hunt

Author's Notes: Just wanted to make note starting here, as this is the time lapse. In the game, Freya states when they approach the gates of Burmecia that she has not seen her home in five years, alluding that she left likely only months after Sir Fratley departed. Later, in Cleyra, she says that she heard that Prince Puck left a month after her, "making it three years." When she meets Zidane, she also says three years. Which, naturally, makes things a bit difficult when it comes to setting up a timeline. So I kind of tweaked her side of things, alluding that she did leave likely two years after Fratley, three years prior to gameplay, and that she meets Zidane at some point earlier on. I tried to keep it as accurate as possible, considering the continuity errors already present in the game.

Just wanted to throw that disclaimer out there in the open so no one gets fussy with the specific time she left. She states both. LITERALLY.

That being said, enjoy the chapter! I'd love to hear from some readers, hint-hint! ;P

Chapter Two:
The Festival of the Hunt

I shan’t forget the words the faultless general spoke that day. To have confidence in my own skills. And yet, I could not return to my love without the knowledge I could keep her safe were the need to arise. Unable to return, I instead traveled the Mist Continent, facing challenge after challenge, and achieving victory upon victory.

Four years have come and gone, moons and seasons passed. My travels have led me to the regency of Lindblum, for a competition known as the Festival of the Hunt. Such a fierce contest would be a test my skills. If I am victorious, perhaps it would be time to face the legendary swordsman once more.

The beasts are fierce, but my blade is more so. I cut through the air, and fiends fall like leaves in the wind beneath the force of my blade. I search the city that crawls with ravenous creatures, keeping my eye out for the one true test. A yell echoes through the air, and I race to the central point of the Business District. An Ironite roars and glides upward, perching on the Sundial Fountain. Jumping to his feet, the young boy readies a dagger in either hand.

Ruffled blond locks frame his determined face, and tattered clothes drape his body. Fierce eyes cut through the youth, and the dragon roars wildly.

“Alright, you scumbag!” he yells fiercely, throwing a dagger like a boomerang. It cuts across the beast, and he catches the blade as the dragon screeches. Fire blasts from its mouth and the blond barely dodges in time. “Shit!” he yells, rolling sideways. This Ironite is fiercer than any I’ve encountered near Burmecia. Wild eyes like a beaten and starved animal — thirsty for fresh blood. A light swirls around the fiend, and a line of lavender traces down the sky. It erupts in sudden lightning, and the Thundaga sends him to his knees. I pull a Potion from the pouch on my belt, and race to his side.

“Here,” I say, quickly handing him the small vial.

“Thanks,” he replies, gulping down the fluid in a rapid swallow. He stands, lifting the daggers from the ground.

“You look like you could use the aid of a Dragon Knight,” I say, drawing my spear from its back-mount.

“Yeah — I’m getting my ass kicked,” the blond chuckles, accepting my assistance. “I’ve fought

these before, but never one this ugly.”

“I have not seen one this fierce before, either,” I agree. I leap from the cobblestone path, and rise above the pale beast. The blond seizes its distraction, and focuses his energy. Suddenly, bright scoops of light cut through the air, and the Ironite writhes. My blade falls, and knocks him from his perch. Wide wings flap rapidly, and a gust forces us back. It flies upward again, but I match its move. Wind swirls around me, dragons forming as they propel me forth. Again, my spear pierces the beast. It shrieks painfully, and slams to the cobblestone.

“Hey, we did it!” the blond exclaims, leaping in victory. Before us, the Ironite stirs and groans as it lifts its head from the ground.

“Perhaps you’ve celebrated prematurely,” I reply, readying my spear.

“Dammit,” he says lightly, drawing his daggers once more. Suddenly, the pale dragon takes flight, swooping through the air. It lunges closer, and I leap above it. The blond yells agonizingly as the Ironite’s teeth cut into the flesh beneath ragged denim. Shielded by the sunlight, I plummet downward. The blade plunges through its heart and it releases my comrade with a shriek that echoes across the city.

Blood leaks across reptilian skin, the deep crimson contrasted against the pale rose scales. I withdraw my blade, still standing atop the carcass of the fallen Ironite. Nearby, the blond groans painfully. Denim is stained a dark shade of vermillion, and the fluid oozes down his limb from jagged puncture wounds. I approach, kneeling beside him.

“Bastard,” he swore quietly, hissing with the pain. I pull a vial from my belt containing a shimmering gold fluid.

“This will sting,” I warn. He braces himself, and I pour half of the contents over his wound. Skin hisses and sizzles, steam rising as scar tissue closes over the wound. I hand him the rest of the vial. “You should feel much better.” He examines the substance for a moment.

“Elixir?” he asks and I nod. ‘Not easy to come by those. Thanks,’ he adds, swigging the potent fluid in one swallow. A frown slides across his face and he smacks his lips at the bitter flavor. He stands, still struggling slightly on his injured leg. “Damn, I’ve been disqualified, though.” Blue eyes look up to me and he smiles. “Looks like you’re gonna win this one.” Time is called, and a buzzer echoes through the town. Contestants flood into the square, and

middle-aged man approaches us. He is tall, and his face hidden beneath a burly set of eyebrows and long beard; he wears a long minister's robe lined with white cuffs and lace.

"Congratulations to you all," he begins. "You all have done well today, setting records and challenges for years to come. On behalf of Regent Cid Fabool IX, I — Minister Artania of Lindblum — present you with your reward of five thousand Gil." I step forward to accept my prize, and onlookers applaud.

"But he cheated!" a voice exclaims. Our heads swivel, and my eyes meet a fiery glare. 'The rat had help taking down that Ironite,' she proclaims. A long heavy axe props against the ground by her side, and for a moment I contemplate if the weapon is, in fact, heavier and taller than she. Russet tresses are ruffled and disheveled from action, but frame almond-colored skin. "I'm the true victor here," she challenged.

"Your… name, miss?" Minister Artania asks, eyes glancing over the records sheet.

"Lani," she replies curtly, flipping her hair arrogantly.

“Yes, well,” he continues, lowering the scores. “You have placed in second. Were Fratley here to be disqualified, you would be the victor.”

“That’s right,” she replies, stepping forward.

“However, there is no rule against aid in battle during the Festival of the Hunt,” he continues. “In the case that one does receive assistance from another competitor, the one landing the final blow is awarded with the points. This would mean that the champion has no reason to be disqualified and therefore wins the competition.” He shakes my hand absently and I pocket the Gil. I don’t have to cut my eyes sideways to see that fierce gaze piercing into me; those eyes bore into me from behind. The Minster bows and takes his leave as the competitors disperse.

“You arrogant little bastard,” she spits, and I turn to face her.

“The rules of the competition are clear, and I am not at fault,” I reply coolly. “Perhaps you should not feel so sorely at your defeat.”

“I’m not a sore loser,” she snorts. ‘I just hate it when dirty scum like you cheats and gets away with

it.’ She lifts her axe in challenge, and I turn from her. “Don’t turn your back from me, filthy rat!”

“Perhaps you should not be so keen to search for battle,” I advise without meeting her gaze.

“Or maybe you’re just much of a damn coward to fight me!” she accused, and I heard the large blade scrape across the cobblestone. A warm wind drifts through the square, swirling dust as it passes through. Footsteps rapidly approach as she charges me from behind. At the last moment, I swiftly duck and dodge to the side. She falls flat, knees scraping across the stones. I draw my spear once more, still coated with the sticky blood of the Ironite.

Her axe slams against my spear, metal screeching as it comes into contact. Easily, I break the deflection, slinging her to the side. Light flickers and swirls around her as she focuses her energy into a spell. I jump upward as Fire erupts around me, and she barely manages to dodge my spear. Hastily, she casts another spell, but my movements are too quick for her magic to trace.

Snorting with frustration, she lunges again, and I leap back as the axe embeds itself in the stone. I focus my energy into my Dragon Knight skills. Light swirls and bursts forth. A whirlwind rises

around her, blossoming cerise dragons that wrap themselves around her. Razor-like petals cut through the air, and she yelps as they slice through the air before dispersing in a red shimmering light. The stubborn girl stands shakily, small gashes oozing red across her arms. She wipes a little blood from her cheek, smearing it across the suntanned skin. I sheathe my spear against my back.

“You have lost this battle,” I declare. “Gracefully accept defeat, and learn from the experience you have gained in this challenge.” Her narrowed gaze meets mine, stern and steady. I turn before she responds, and cross the square. The blond stands, staggering a bit at first, but walks by my side as I head to the Air-Cab Station.

“’S about time someone kicked her butt,” he remarks with a laugh. “She’s always cheating to win the Festival.” I don’t reply, but nod silently. “So, your name’s Fratley?”

“It is,” I reply. “Of Burmecia. And yours?”

“Zidane,” he grins, ‘Of Tantalus.’ We arrive at the station and he thinks for a moment. “Why don’t I buy you lunch,” he asks. Bright blue eyes shimmer with mischief as our gaze meets. “Just as a thanks,” he adds. I nod, a smile touching my lips. We sit on

the cab and it lurches forward. “There’s this great place in the Industrial District that has all kinds of stuff.”

The air cab arrives and he talkatively leads me to the restaurant. It’s a rundown little place, but the warm scents escaping from the kitchen are enticing. We sit and order, and our food arrives timely. I suck down a spoon of soup, the fluid warm as it flows down my throat.

“Y’know, your name is really familiar for some reason,” he trails nonchalantly. Curious cobalt eyes strike me as he studies my features beneath my helm, and his lips purse thoughtfully. “Have we met before?”

“Doubtful,” I reply, “I have been through the regency of Lindblum once before, but it was quite some time ago and I didn’t stay very long.”

“…That’s *really* buggin’ me…” he says after a moment, sucking down a spoonful of soup. His spoon clanks against porcelain as he dives for another mouthful and I clear my throat quietly.

“You said you were of Tantalus,” I say, sipping from my drink. “I’m not familiar with the name.”

“It’s… well, they’re kind of like my brothers,” he replies with a mouthful. “We’re a band of… uh, ‘financial negotiators.’ We travel and perform some of Lord Avon’s plays.”

“A theatrical group,” I reply. I am not ignorant — I realize that ‘financial negotiators’ is his term for a band of thieves. But he seems kind enough, and I have no reason to judge him based on his profession.

“Yeah,” he nods. “Actually, we’re heading to Alexandria tomorrow for a performance of *Wishing Upon a Star* for the nobles.”

“Alexandria…” I repeat distantly.

“Yeah,” he agrees, taking a large bite from his soft roll. ‘The Queen, nobles of Treno — even the Princess. The money’s pretty good, too.’ Warm liquid slides down my throat as I take another spoonful, and I stare into the amber broth thoughtfully. His voice vaguely reaches my ears, but the words are lost, muffled by my own contemplation. “…and the castle is amazing. You ever been to Alexandria?”

“Mm,” I nod, churning the soup with my spoon. Steam swirls upward, salty and warm as it brushes my nose. “I, too, am destined for Alexandria…”

“Really?” he says, swallowing another mouthful. “For what?” My gaze meets his, cerulean glinting with curiosity as he studies me, awaiting my answer.

“…To see an old friend,” I reply finally, spoon finally finding lips once more. I can feel his eyes scrutinizing me, uncertain if I am truthful. Finally, he tears off another bite of bread.

“Well, if you want, I could talk to the Boss,” he says. ‘Y’know, see if you could hitch a ride.’ My gaze finds his, and the blond smiles as he senses my uncertainty. “It’s no big deal. You saved my ass, after all.” Hesitance wavers, and a smile flickers across my features as I turn back to my soup.

“I’ll take you up on that offer,” I reply. After all, the Regency of Lindblum is by no means a short distance from Alexandria castle. If the kind thief wishes to repay me, I am not too modest to accept gratitude. “I will join you on your journey to Alexandria.” He beams, grin spreading ear-to-ear.

“Alrighty, then,” he nods. From the corner, a chime sounds from the clock over the kitchen doorway. Another rings after it, followed by a third. The blond chokes, nearly sucking down his spoon. Coughing he looks up to the clock, and sighs. “Ah, shit. I’m late,” he says, throwing his fork down.

“Late?” I repeat, studying the frustration in youthful features as he gathers himself.

“I was supposed to be back at two thirty — for our final rehearsal,” Zidane replies, standing.

“I did not intend to keep you,” I say, sliding off of my barstool. “You have my apologies.”

“Oh, no — i-it’s not your fault,” he stammers, delving a hand into his pocket. He pulls out a small pouch, and fingers probe its contents as he searches for payment. Before he can protest, I quickly place some of my reward onto the bar. The tender nods, accepting the payment. “Hey — I thought I was treating you to lunch!” he frowns.

“Please, consider it gratitude for offering me transportation to Alexandria,” I reply. After all, the boy was a thief — and young. I didn’t have to guess to know he likely was just scraping by. He smiles, accepting the gesture, and I follow him to the street.

“Follow me,” Zidane says, racing towards the cable car station. Hastily, I board behind him. “The guys are down in the Theatre District. I’ll talk to the Boss about you ‘stowing away,’” he says jokingly. Sunbeams cast in through the window, shown brightly on golden strands. Sapphires twinkle in the

light, ambition and mischief gleaming in his eyes as he watches the city below. After a moment, the cable car lurches, screeching against the wires as we arrive in the Theatre District. We round the corner, heading down the stairs; he approaches a tall run-down building and stops.

“Wait here for just a minute,” he says, and I oblige. The spunky youth disappears behind the door, and I can hear a booming voice from inside. The voice calms, and a conversation reaches my ears. I try to make out the words, but they are muffled by the wall between us. Suddenly, laughter echoes from inside, and I hear the blond protest loudly. The door opens and the blond throws a remark over his shoulder. “Yeah, go get bitten by and Ironite and see how *you* like it!” He turns to me, face a warm tint of red, and I can’t help but chuckle. He scowls and I stifle my laughter.

“My apologies,” I say, clearing my throat. “I hope he didn’t give you any trouble?”

“Pfft, yeah, right,” he replies sarcastically, shooting a dirty eye back to the doorway. The laughter dies down behind the door, and he shakes his head. ‘Nah, he just likes to give me a hard time,’

Zidane shrugged. “Oh, and you’re good to go with us tomorrow.”

“You have my thanks,” I reply, bowing politely. Gloved fingers scratch his head, uncertain of how to respond. He clears his throat awkwardly.

“You’re welcome,” he replies quietly. Silence falls over us and I look to the pale blue sky, warm with the afternoon sun. A dove flies distantly, briefly disappearing as it hits the sunlight. “You wanna watch the rehearsal?” he finally asks, and I sense his uncertainty.

“A generous offer, but I’ve troubled you enough,” I reply. “What time will the ship depart?”

“Dawn,” he replied. “Meet us by the castle before daybreak, okay?” I nod, and bid him farewell with a smile. I turn, crossing the cobbled path to the stairs. Wood whines on its hinges as he heads back inside the rickety building, and a spurt of booming laughter reaches my ear on the brisk breeze as it wafts passed. I smile to myself; I must admit, I am jealous of such companionship. I’ve spent too much time seeking my own strength, and loneliness has gotten the better of me.

And I miss her dearly. Like a stone that sits on my heart, heavy and stifling as it bears down against my spirit. And yet, I know this quest is necessary. In the four years of travelling, I've seen what the world is becoming… I fear a war might yet be upon us, slowly rising like a drowsy dragon from a deep winter's slumber — and just as fierce.

'*Freya… only a little longer… and I will return to you.*'

4. Anticipation

Author's Note: Thank you so much to VashandNaomiForever for reviewing! Got me in the mood to update! ;) Hope this piques your interest — things are starting to get warmed up! Enjoy the read, and don't forget to review — it makes updates post sooner!

Chapter Three:
Anticipation

Rose beams reflect off of the crystal sword that rises from the center of the castle. It shimmers with the dawn, radiant as the sun across the misty horizon. Marble bricks surround it in an elegantly crafted structure, and somewhere beyond those walls, the renowned General awaits. I will challenge her once more, my skills now sharper than once before. Back then, I knew what a feat such a challenge would be. And yet, I still overestimated my own strength, my own cunning… my own ability.

“You should be proud and confident in your skills, Sir Fratley.” The words have lingered with me since that day over four years ago. A bold statement, considering the source. And yet, I was not capable of defeating her. Should the time arise… No, I must know that I can protect Burmecia — my King and comrades… and her.

I cannot fail this time.

Wind brushes pale locks over my face, and I swipe them beneath my helm. The morning breeze is cool, especially from the deck of the Prima Vista, and I shiver slightly beneath the wind. I watch as the ship approaches, the gleaming sword ever-nearer.

“We should be docking in a little while,” the blond yawns behind me, footsteps echoing on the hollow deck. “Baku said we’d be dropping you off at the city gate — you don’t have clearance to enter the castle, or something like that.”

“That will be fine,” I reply distantly. Eyes bore into me, studying me as the boy watches me from behind.

“Something on your mind?” he finally asks, stepping to my side. Elbows rest on the railing, and he leans over the side of the ship. Blue eyes linger

across the distance as he watches the kingdom drift closer.

“…I’ve awaited my return to Alexandria for some time,” I reply honestly.

“Oh?” he pries. Eyes do not meet mine, and I sense the false tone of aloofness laced into the syllable. ‘Why’s that?’ I don’t reply. Instead, my thoughts turn inward, and I quietly contemplate his question. Blue strikes me, interrupting my thoughts as he glances over to me. “…What’s your story, Fratley?” he asks finally. I chuckle; to such a carefree youth, I must appear as an enigma — desperately reaching to gain what I can never grasp.

“Story…?” I repeat to myself, considering the term.

“Yeah,” he replies, turning to face me. He leans on his elbows, back towards the distance. “I mean, you said you’re from Burmecia… and you have a friend to visit here in Alexandria… But you obviously miss your home…”

“And how did you deduce that?” I reply, raised-eyebrowed. He stops, wide-eyed as he realized his assumption must have stirred me.

“I, uh…” he stammers. “Well, who wouldn’t miss their home after a while?” he finally recovers, shrugging. I chuckle at the response and sigh.

“The roots of my conquest are much too complicated,” I reply quietly. “But… only once I know I can protect her… can I return to Burmecia.”

“Ooohh, so this is about a *girl*,” he remarks knowingly, and I chuckle quietly. “Well, lucky for you, I’m an expert with the ladies.”

“Is that so?” I ask, lips turning in a subconscious smile. “So, Ruby is your ‘lady,’ then?”

“What!?” he exclaims, clearly not expecting the assumption. “N-no, we’re just friends! She helps us with the plays and stuff… we… we’re not.” I chortle, the matter-of-fact confidence suddenly shattering beneath accusation. Realizing my jest, he lets himself laugh, scratching and ruffling blond locks. Suddenly, a horn whistles over the blustering sails and cool winds, and he stands straight as the airship begins to descend. My eyes linger over the still-sleeping city. Crystal water flickers in the pale sunlight around the castle, and I can faintly make out a boat near the gate. And on the outskirts, lush grass waves in the breeze, rippling like ocean water in the sea breeze. Wood scrapes field and the airship

lurches as it halts. I turn to Zidane, eyes vibrant with the morning sun, and he beams.

“Good luck, Fratley,” he smiles. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Likewise,” I reply, and his features twist, puzzled. ‘It was, indeed, a pleasure to make your acquaintance.’ Fingers dive into my pocket, and I feel for the winnings. Coins glisten in the rose sunlight, and he startles at the gesture. “For your troubles,” I say, pushing it towards him. The blond studies me, uncertain and hesitant.

“No, I… I can’t —”

“The reward means nothing,” I reply. “It was a test for my skill. The prize… was not my goal.”

“Yeah but… you earned it,” he says, pushing my hand away. “I’d’ve been in deep shit if you hadn’t taken that Ironite out.” I place the Gil in his hand, and close his fingers over it.

“And yet it is I that owes you,” I reply quietly. I turn, and disembark. He watches me silently; I can feel glossy sapphires gazing across the field long after the youth is out of site. And it was truth; he had taught me something I would not have learned on my own: when to accept defeat. True, I still wished

to hone my skills, defeat the acclaimed General Beatrix. And yet… even still, my heart longs for home. For her face and voice — radiant emeralds that shimmer even beneath the rainclouds of Burmecia.

No matter the outcome, I will return home once the challenge was complete. Loneliness is not a favorable companion.

The city is now in full swing, excitement buzzing at the arrival of the Lindblum Theatre Ship. Nobles have begun to arrive, parading themselves through the city like royalty as they make their way to the harbor. Alexandrian Soldiers guard the borders, escorting the nobles to the ornate rowboat that leads to Alexandria castle. I approach the dock, crowded as a group of arrogant nobles await the next boat over. One scoffs at me, my rugged armor not presentable in the presence of stuffed-shirt peacocks. I ignore him, instead approaching the Alexandrian Soldier at the head of the group. She eyes me suspiciously as I approach, and steps away from the nobles.

“Excuse me, do you have a ticket?” she asks rudely, swiping dark bangs from her face. Quietly, I shake my head. “This bay is strictly reserved for the Nobles of Treno and ticket holders for the performance by Tantalus.”

“My apologies,” I reply. “It has been a while since I last visited Alexandria. I seek an audience with the acclaimed General Beatrix of Alexandria.” She raises an eyebrow, sneaking a glance to the guard nearest her.

“With what business?” she asks.

“Would the General have an audience with me?” I ask again. “The regards are private matters. I am an old friend of General Beatrix — Sir Fratley of Burmecia.” The soldier swaps glances with the blond again, and the soldier shrugs in response. I follow their gaze, eyes switching between them. Finally, the brunette turns and signals a knight down from the walkway.

“Haagan,” she calls. The knight approaches, saluting her as he stands ready. I recognize him as one of the Knights of Pluto, lead by the Captain I spoke to many moons ago. “Accompany this verm — er… Burmeican to the castle.”

“Yes, m’am,” he replies affirmative. A small tone of reluctance is laced with the response, and I am uncertain if it is due to the order or for having to take them. Eyes linger curiously — hesitantly — as the female soldier turns back to me, and behind me a murmur arises among the nobles.

“You have my thanks,” I say, eyes still considering the youthful knight.

“Make no mistake, Burmecian,” she retorts. “I make no promises. I highly doubt the General has time to make an audience with a sort like you. However, the call is not mine to make.” I study her for a moment, eyes gazing down her nose as she looks at me with disgust. I nod silently, following the knight as he leads me down to a small rowboat to the side of the dock. He climbs in, and I follow suit, allowing him to silently row to the marble dock of the palace.

“Wait here,” the knight says as I step onto the dock. Hastily, he crosses the path, stopping by a knight posted by the gate. He whispers, hisses barely audible over the shifting bay waters. The other knight nods, and dark eyes meet mine briefly. The knight called Haagan walks passed him, into the depths of the castle. Rather than approaching the

second guard, I sit cross-legged on the cool sidewalk near a patch of clover. My eyes study it distantly as I await his return.

Alexandria seems different… unsettling.

Time passes slowly, a cackling group of nobles gossip as they pass and the knight watches them silently as they proceed through the entryway. I close my eyes, heavy with my travels, and for a moment I consider abandoning my wait. A sudden sound stirs me, metal clattering against metal and scraping stone as the knight approaches me. I stand, taller than he, and he hesitates.

“I-I’m sorry, sir, but… the General says that she cannot see you,” he reports. “She sends her regards, but said that she had other matters to attend to and had no time for old reminiscences.” The knight salutes me, and I bow my head with acknowledgement. He gestures and I hesitate, but follow him to the gently rocking rowboat. My eyes sink, watching the gentle ripples as the paddle breaks the surface and water swirls around the intrusion. Slow and steady, another gentle stroke. The evening sun burns across the water, and I watch the reflection of the castle. It wavers gently, swaying side to side in reflective bay. Orange light gleams

across marble, and the sight is nearly breath-taking — almost appearing as though the walls are ablaze.

Eyes fixate. Near the airship dock, silver catches the sunset, flickering across the surface as it moves. I watch it, the form blurred against the reflective surface. My eyes glance up to the knight; he appears to not notice the disturbance. Silently, I allow my eyes to flutter back to the firelit castle, darting to the airship hold. Silver locks catch the wind, and I manage a glimpse of paled skin as the large draconic figure slips inside the castle.

A dragon? I have seen many — and bested many in my time… and yet… this one is different. I've never seen one with such a striking appearance — and a rider at that. My eyes linger on the airship dock, hoping to catch a last moment of the beast — or its Master — before fleeting back to the reflective bay waters.

The boat slows as we reach the other side, and we bank near the bay. Hesitantly, I stand and step onto the concrete dock. Eyes flit back to the castle, crystal gleaming brilliantly red with the warm sunset, and faintly I can see the Twin Moons peering up over its spires.

“I told you she wouldn’t have time for the likes of you, Burmecian,” the soldier taunts from behind me. My gaze meets hers, smug with satisfaction. “Perhaps it’s time for you to scurry on home.” I don’t answer, the provocative statement falling against deaf ears as my eyes draw back up to the airship dock.

5. Amiss in Alexandria

Author's Note: No reviews? Sad face. Well, here's the next chapter; hope any readers out there like it! Reviews do, in fact, make it update quicker!

Chapter Four:
Amiss in Alexandria

The thought has plagued me the rest of the evening. Fiery sunlight has long since vanished from the skyline, and the Twin Moons gleam brightly over the quiet city. From the inn, I can hear cries and laughter as Tantalus concludes their show, the play winding down to its final scenes. The orchestra sets the mood, the final scene called to the stage and distant murmurs from the onlookers breaks my thoughts.

Perhaps I should take advantage of this moment — discover what affairs Beatrix is handling. True, the knowledge is no business of mine. But the dragonrider… that being was of interest. I stand, quietly slipping out the door and down the stairs, feet whispering as they brush warped wood. The

Innkeeper sleeps quietly behind the greeting desk, and I make no attempt to wake him. As expected, the streets remain empty — most having either gathered to the rooftops or else retired for the evening. I cross the square to the bay — left unguarded when the soldiers resigned to their posts before the evening.

And even this presents an obstacle. With no soldiers, no boats remain on the bay to carry me to the other side. With upmost silence, I slip beneath the still mirror, barely rippling the shuddering surface. The water is chilled, even through cloak and mail. But I persevere. Darkness closes around me, and I can no longer see the bay on the other side. Yet it is there, and I know it is straight across. Soon, fingers find the slick surface of the dock, and I follow it to the side. Quietly, I breach the surface, shuddering a little as cool air seeps into my lungs. Eyes scan my surroundings — two guards stand by the entryway, both intrigued in the other's conversation. The young female laughs as the knight chuckles, having not noticed the slight movement as I move into the shadow.

I wait. Shadows move around me, the courtyard torches just beyond the corner where I lurk. I can hear the announcer, a booming voice announcing the

conclusion of the play. The audience applauds, feet shuffle as they give a standing ovation. Cheers begin to die down, heavy-soled shoes resonating through the castle as the nobles make their way back towards the bay. Quietly, I shift myself around the corner, out of view from the nearing boat. It passes, the waves rippling against me as it cuts across the mirrored surface. I watch across the water, nobles filing into the numerous boats and streaking across the bay as they make for the inn, or some way back to Treno.

Silence settles across the night-chilled bay, and the Alexandrian Soldiers chat lazily as they finish their last round of the castle grounds before turning their shifts over to the Knights of Pluto. They cross the open courtyard before filing into the castle entryway for the evening. Only two remain — sleepily gazing out across the mirror surface. The Knights have, no doubt, had a long evening, and I expect they'll doze soon. With upmost stealth, I creep around the side of the castle, surface shuddering as I glide across. Feet meet solid ground, glad to once more feel lush blades of grass beneath them. A cool breeze brushes me, and I tremble beneath my soggy cloak. Eyes dart, studying my surroundings for the best point of entry.

The rounded wall is thick and solid with no visible entryway. But above me, the tower opens into a boardwalk — distantly, I hear metal scuff the wall as a knight keeps watch. The path crosses the open courtyard, moonlight casting a shadow just beneath as it stretches to the other tower. Stealthily, I linger among the shadow as I cross, skilled feet silent against the cushioned ground. The knight senses nothing, and I follow the wall to the other side.

Ears prick, alert and desperate to catch a sound upon the wind as it follows me. It appears this corridor is unguarded, and I hesitate. Not knowing could prove costly, this I know. And yet, I seize the opening — knowing, too, that it might be an only chance. Knees extend and I leap, cutting silently through the air like a petal on the breeze. Gracefully, I catch my footing on the pathway; it appears instincts served me well. I slip beyond the wall, landing in the back of the auditorium where Tantalus had just preformed merely hours prior. The space is empty now, save for the Theatre Ship. I sense no movement within, the actors no doubt retired for the evening in preparation for the journey back to Lindblum in the morrow.

Light catches my eye, peeking through a large entryway. Staying in the shadow of the wall, I slip down to it, carefully peering through. The hallway is empty, footsteps distant as they pass near the corridor. Warm torchlight flickers in my eyes — there are few shadows to conceal me. My heart flutters — and, for a moment, I hesitate. For what reason do I wish to sneak into the castle? Suspicion? What matter is it of mine?

"…the 'Vermecian' at the castle?" he asks quietly, and she giggles at the pun. Quickly, I slip back into the shadow of the moonlit auditorium. "He wanted to see the General?"

"Yeah," she confirms. "'Called himself 'an old friend.'" The pair laughed and she scoffed. "As if the General would associate herself with vermin."

"You think he was suspicious?" the knight asks, voice trailing as they stop outside the entryway.

"Suspicious?" she repeats, and she shakes her head. 'Doubtful. Even so, the General refused to see him. She had Haagan send him on his way. I know she's too busy to deal with things like that.' Her voice lowers. "I overheard her talking with the queen during the play — they're in some sort of war meeting for a while." Eyebrows raise and she

giggles. “I’m sure I wasn’t supposed to hear that, but well… I was guarding the balcony doors.” He laughs, and clears his throat.

“So,” he says, voice heavy with seduction. “Where was that place you wanted to show me?” She giggles again, and passes through the archway into the auditorium. I stifle a breath, my shadow mere inches from hers as he follows. She looks up, eyes glistening beneath the light of the Twin Moons. His gaze doesn’t follow, instead trailing the length of her body.

“Isn’t the view amazing?” she replies. He chuckles, and smiles.

“More than that, from where I’m standing,” he says wittily. She looks down to him, and she laughs at the tease. “Y’know, you said that war meeting’s gonna last a little while. In the meantime…” He pulls closer to her, and she smiles as their lips meet. But my mind is distant… War meeting? Is that what General Beatrix was attending to? I hesitate, wishing the love-struck pair would move away from me.

“Weimar, is that all you think about?” she teases and he chuckles. A smile trickles across her face, and he leads her by the hand towards the center aisle. I seize the moment — backs turn, and I slip to

the other side of the entryway. I hesitate, uncertain of where to go. Suddenly, footsteps reach my ears and I dash for the stairs. Shadows cover me as I slip behind them, kneeling to conceal myself.

“You there!” he yells, and I swallow. Had I been spotted? “Pluto Knight!” he calls, and footsteps turn the corner. Metal clatters as he approaches.

“Yes, Capitan?” the knight replies hesitantly, saluting his superior.

“Have you seen General Beatrix?” he asks, and I hold my breath.

“No, sir,” he says, standing at ease. “Sorry, sir, but I believe she’s still in the Queen’s chamber.”

“A meeting was called with the Queen?” he asks urgently, flustered by his omission.

“I believe it was just for the General, sir,” he replies. “I heard one of the soldiers telling Weimer about it.” The Captain sighed quietly.

“…Very well,” he says disappointedly. “What’s this?” he asks suddenly, and I peer around the stairs to catch a glimpse. He crosses to the entryway, kneeling by water-stained carpet.

“I-it looks like water, sir,” the knight responds. He glances up to the ceiling, and shrugs. “The roof must be leaking.”

“A leak indeed,” the oblivious captain replies, and I breathe easy. It appears as though they have no suspicions of an intruder. “Very well, if you see the General, tell her I have matters of my own to discuss with her.”

“Yes, sir!” he replies, saluting the Captain as they part ways. Footsteps fade, and the sound of clattering metal becomes distant. So… a war meeting in the Queen’s chamber — and in secret, no less.

It would appear my suspicions had become truths. I step from beneath the spiraled stairs, climbing them silently as I reach the raised hallway. The right leads to an open balcony that overlooks the auditorium; moonlight seeps in beneath the crested arch, spilling onto velvet-red. The double-doors to my right are open and unguarded. Eyes strain as I peer past the doors, scanning the empty atrium. It seemed as though the Queen did not want any eavesdropping on her meeting with the General.

“Your Majesty!” The voice is loud and awed, clearly unsettled as it cuts through the still air of the

foyer. I follow it, muffled words becoming clearer as I reach the door to the Queen's chamber. Laughter bellows, a husky woman's voice heavy with humor.

"Beatrix, do you object to Kuja's plans?" she says.

"Your Majesty," she replies, voice stern. "I assure you, I will follow you until Kingdom Come. If Burmecia poses a threat to you or the Princess — or any of Alexandria, my blade will be the first stained. Make no mistake. But black mages and Eidolons? That's going too far!"

"Rest assured, Beatrix," the Queen protests, "Kuja's promises will put those filthy rats in their place!"

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, the use of these 'methods' are completely unnecessary." she replies quietly. "He says that it would take months to build an army of these mages — why wait that long? My soldiers alone would be more than enough to take Burmecia!"

"You fail to understand, dear General," a soft voice replies. The words are smooth and silky, the soft tone poison on my ears. "The capabilities of my

black mages far exceed those of your…‘soldiers.’ Burmecia will be vanquished with ease.”

“The forces we have are adequate,” she retorts firmly. “My forces would bring Burmecia to its knees in a matter of days.”

“Days?” he snorts with a chuckle. “Once the dear Regent of Lindblum discovers your intentions, he will no doubt send aid to the rodents. Would you and your forces stand against a war between kingdoms?”

“If Burmecia is a threat to Alexandria, then Regent Cid will have no reason to —”

“That’s enough, Beatrix,” the Queen interrupts. Like a scolded hound, she silences, the atrium heavy with tension. “As my General, you will respect my decision. I will make excellent use of the black mage army and the Eidolons.”

“I assure you, Your Majesty, the wait will be well worth your while,” he replies with sincerity. I swallow; my mouth is dry, tongue sticking to the roof as I nervously shift against the wall. Beatrix sighs, and I can almost hear her heart pound against her chest. Metal scrapes stone as she shifts uncomfortably, and I know that this meeting is finished.

Silent footsteps guide me back to the auditorium, now empty, and I don't hesitate as I leap over the castle wall. Shadows drape me as I land on the other side, the cooled wind distant against my still-damp clothing. My eyes drift back up, lingering on the airship dock where the man named Kuja had arrived.

I swallow hard, uncertain of what to do. I know what I must do — return to Burmecia and inform the King of Queen Brahne's plot. Yet it seems unreal — like nightmare that merely feels like reality. My gaze drifts downward, watching the wind ripple the mirrored surface. Alexandria castle towers behind me, and the Twin Moons cast a glow over the marbled walls. Sudden footsteps catch the breeze, and I turn sharply. A figure, silhouetted against the moonlight, approaches the bay. Her frame is slender and fit, muscles accented by the pale light and casted shadow, and her head hangs heavily. Chestnut curls sway in and out of the light with the breeze, and I glimpse maroon as she gazes into the glass-like bay.

"General Beatrix," I say, crossing the dock. I approach her, swallowing to hide the apprehension in my voice. She turns quickly, startled by the intrusion on her thoughts.

“Sir Fratley?” she realizes. “What are you doing here?”

“Hoping to see an old friend,” I retort; a smile flits across her lips, fading as she turns to the bay. Her features are accented by the moonlight, flawless despite the weariness they hold.

“It’s been a long time,” she finally says, our eyes not meeting.

“Indeed, it has,” I reply quietly. She falls silent, eyes drifting over the mirrored surface as she studies the still reflection of Alexandria Castle. The steady rush of water from the fountain breaks the otherwise soundless night. I study her quietly; her eyes greet me as an old friend, and yet her heart is heavy.

“You have my apologies for not accepting your company earlier,” she finally says.

“Never you mind,” I reply. “Your soldiers informed me you would likely be too busy to allow for an audience.” Her gaze meets mine, uncertain as she hesitates.

“That’s right,” she says finally. “The performances by Tantalus are quite a job to handle,” she adds, looking away.

“Understandably so,” I say, voice trailing. A brisk wind crosses us, fabric rustling as it sways. “I had hoped you might accept my challenge once more.”

“…Challenge?” she repeats nervously.

“A friendly challenge,” I nod. “You see, I’ve travelled Gaia for quite some time, testing my skills. I wish to test them against those that defeated me before.” Unwavering, she turns coolly.

“…I do not wish to combat you, Fratley,” she replies. Quietly, I unsheathe my spear, and she turns as I ready it.

“…I insist,” I reply quietly, the words quiet against the silent air. Hesitantly, she draws the Save the Queen. Rubies catch the light, sparkling like stars in the midnight sky above. Ferocity burns against burgundy irises, and I exchange the look. I know she is waiting for the first move, and I give it to her swiftly. Blade in full swing, I lung towards the General. Metal boots scrape stone as she leaps, and my spear hisses as it lands. She charges, blade outstretched like an extension of her own arm as it swipes through the air, and I jump. Shadow conceals me as I cut through the air, and at the peak, I plunge downward. Unable to spot me quick enough, she skids to the side in a failed dodge. Metal whispers

against flesh, and she winces as red warmth oozes from the slice.

Only wavering for a moment, she retaliates, cold metal piercing the air as she lunges towards me. With the agility of a Dragon Knight, feet guide me back, and I land a safe distance away. I raise a hand, focusing my energy into my dragon skills. A crest mirroring that on my helm forms beneath her, and she recalls the skill from years ago. The ghostly dragon takes shape, and she leaps away from its attack. An aura grows around her, magic swirling around her blade. It erupts suddenly, the light from the Holy Magic illuminating the dock. I wince away, fingers doing nothing to shield my eyes. Suddenly, it catches on rubies, and my blade scarcely intercepts in time. Diamond-crested steel swipes low, and I stumble back from the quick attack as she takes another jab.

Once more, I make for the safety of the sky, leaping from the ground. I hurl my spear, and it slices through the air towards her. With expert time, she propels herself backward — just as I expected. The whirlwind rises around her, and she shields herself as russet locks whip in the gust. Cerise dragons rise up from the ground, smoke-like forms wrapping around her. Light bursts, and petals cut

through the air. They dissipate, sparkling like garnets beneath the Twin Moons. She kneels, gathering her strength as I land. Metal whispers almost silently as it is pulled from stone, and I ready myself as she stands. Rubies flicker, and the blade erupts in an orange light. She charges, and my blade meets hers. Suddenly, the power bursts, the force pushing me back. Knees hit stone as I recover from the attack, metal scraping stone as I lift my spear.

Hot metal cuts across me, the General hitting her mark in my recovery. I wince and the General smirks as our eyes meet. I take the moment; my blade flies swiftly through the air and she propels herself backwards as it nicks her cape. I stand and charge, and our blades crash again. Equally matched, we parry one another. The General smiles, breaking the stance, and sheathing her sword. White light radiates from her fingers, and warmth seeps over me as her Curaga dissipates.

“You are quite the Knight, Sir Fratley,” she says, smiling. “Your skills are, truly, impressive.”

“As are yours, General,” I reply, allowing my weapon to be sheathed. She bows gracefully, accepting the truce. She smiles brightly, catching her breath as we end the duel.

“Your King should be proud to have such skill among his Dragon Knights.”

“I have not seen our King in four years,” I reply quietly.

“You never returned to Burmecia?” she asks, looking back to me. I shake my head. “…I see…” she says quietly, eyes drifting back to the reflective water. A stillness settles over the battlefield. Finally, she sighs and gives a little laugh. “It’s been four years… and I have not encountered a battle quite like that since your first challenge.”

“Nor have I,” I reply distantly. “I hope we must never challenge one another under more… unfriendly circumstances.” She startles, gazing up at me uncertainly. Ruby eyes study me, our gazes locking for a moment before she looks away. For an instance, I wonder if she realizes the intentions of my words, but she sighs.

“I must agree with that,” she finally says, standing. Our gazes meet once more, and I catch a glimpse of remorse behind her friendliness. “I fear its time I take my leave.” She bows graciously, a final gesture to someone of equal skill. The General turns, brunette curls shuddering against the breeze, and she crosses the dock. I watch her go, moonlight

illuminating her in an ethereal glow as she passes through the castle entryway.

And something swells inside me. A sickening knot of dread that tugs at my insides and pulls my heart to the pit of my stomach. My chest feels heavy with anticipation, heart beat racing as it pounds against my ribs and into the rest of my body. Dryly, my tongue clings to the roof of my mouth and I swallow harshly against the lump in my throat.

This… this is fear.

“Well, that was quite the display,” a cool voice wafts from the shadows. She turns, and he steps out from the torchlight. Mischief glimmers across marine eyes, and a smirk slithers over pale lips. Beatrix ignores the remark, crossing the hallway. “Too bad you closed the curtain before the end of the scene.”

“He’s an old friend,” she retorts, stopping. “I had no intentions of finishing him. Not that you would know anything of friendly endeavors.” She smirks to herself.

“Yes, well,” he scoffs, picking a fingernail with disinterest. “It seems as though these ‘friendly endeavors’ will be the undoing of you and your kingdom.” Beatrix hesitates, turning to face the other.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You didn’t notice?” he replies arrogantly, eyes locking with hers. Eyes study the mage challengingly, and he chuckles to himself at her ignorance. “‘I hope we must never challenge one another under more… *unfriendly* circumstances,’” he quotes finally. Silence quivers between them, only interrupted by the whispering crackle of the nearby torches. Distain lingers on her gaze as she recalls the conversation. He’d approached her unwaveringly, spoken with such dark resolve… apprehension had lingered on his breath as steady hands drew his spear.

“I see the wheels are turning,” he chuckles coolly — knowingly. Her eyes fall to the floor, studying cracks in the stone. “Let me complete the puzzle for you: it seems your ‘old friend’ has discovered the truth.”

“What are the chances of that?” she snaps. “The meeting was secret — in the Queen’s chamber in the

guarded castle. Not even Captain Steiner knows of the war plans!"

"And you seriously think that a knight of his ranking wouldn't be able to sneak past a few of your…'*soldiers*?'" he mocks. She growls beneath her breath, knuckles whitening as fists clench.

"It would be a bold assumption," she says coolly.

"Couldn't the same be said of the threat of the Burmecians?" he counters quietly. Her brows furrow, taken aback by the remark.

"What are you suggesting?" she asks uncertainly. A brief smile flits across his lips, and eyes dance with torchlight.

"I'm merely suggesting that perhaps you should consider the possibility," he replies. "…and the consequences." Eyes examine him, uncertain of his intentions.

"…That's different," she denies quietly. "The Queen must take action based on the information we've received. She cannot risk an attack on our kingdom."

"And how is it different?" he queries. "What do you think would happen if the King of Burmecia

were to find out before the Queen's attack?" Beatrix swallows, hesitating; she knows she's been defeated. She knows he is right. The General sighs and walks passed the mage, a soft chuckle barely audible over the distant footsteps of the Pluto Knight patrol.

"…I'll take care of it," she finally says, not allowing for a response as she steps out into the brisk night.

6. For My Kingdom

Author's Note: Thanks for the reviews! Had planned to update a little sooner, but inclement weather had other plans. One more to go after this — the epilogue, but the tale is winding to an explosive ending — I hope it is worth the wait! Enjoy, and don't forget that reviews encourage quicker updates!

Chapter Five:
For My Kingdom

Pale rays of sunlight peer in through the window, casting warm sunspots across the aged floorboards. Quietly, feet glide across the floor, guided by an absent mind as I recall the events of the night. Wood creaks beneath my feet as I slip down the stairs, and I pass the Innkeeper silently, the elder still slumbering behind the welcome desk. Cobblestones are still chilled from the night, but the sky is painted rose and gold with the waking morn. Only a few vendors occupy the streets, the town mostly still sleeping in the early hours. The warm scent of

freshly baked bread wafts through the morning breeze as I pass the nearby bakery, and a low growl rumbles through my stomach. But I make haste; the message I bear will not be delayed.

I approach the arches, and beyond them, dew glistens on swaying blades of wild grass. Fragrant wind shudders as it passes, heavy with the perfume of wildflowers basking in the dawn. Suddenly, ears prick alert — catching the whispering footsteps as they approach me. I turn, and radiant sunlight gleams on silver armor. The ornate hilt of the Save the Queen glimmers beneath her cape and russet locks flutter in the quiet breeze.

“General Beatrix…” I say, studying the stern expression across her face. She approaches me, stopping a friendly distance away.

“I had hoped I would catch you before your return to Burmecia,” she says, and my heart shudders. “I wished to speak with you.” I swallow, stifling my nervousness.

“I see,” I say, beckoning her to continue.

“Sir Fratley… forgive me for making assumptions,” she began, eyes kind behind her stern façade. “Last night was… unsettling. I cannot help

but ask… Was something bothering you?" My gaze meets hers, trying to read the unwavering expression.

"Should something be?" I query quietly, and she studies me.

"Your last remark…" she answers. "You said you hoped we would not have to challenge one another under 'unfriendly circumstances.'" Silence falls over us as she awaits my words, but I give her none. I sense the General's suspicion, and I walk a thin line against her trust. "I can't help but wonder what enticed such a statement."

"Beatrix…" I reply.

"Fratley, you're an old friend, and I consider you as nothing less," she says, placing a hand over my shoulder. "If something troubles you… please, confide in me."

"Beatrix…" I begin, turning from her. Garnets bore into me from behind, fierce and stern; I know the determined General will not part without the answer she seeks. 'I can see it in your eyes, and there is not a doubt in my mind you know what it is that troubles me.' A wind whispers as it brushes across us, rustling tall blades of grass as it passes.

She shifts uncertainly behind me and I shake my head. “Do you truly intend to go through with these plans?”

“Plans…?” she repeats uncertainly, feigning innocence. I test her, quietly waiting for her to continue, and she sighs. I turn, satisfied that we both know what information separates us. “Make no mistake, Sir Fratley. I will protect my kingdom.”

“Protect Alexandria from what?” I ask. “What threat does Burmecia pose?”

“We’ve received word that the King is preparing an army,” she replies. I shake my head, awed by such a bold statement.

“I assure you, the King has made no such plot,” I say firmly.

“With all due respect, you have not seen your homeland in four years,” she protests. “How can you be certain things have not changed since your departure?”

“Burmecia… was — *is* at peace,” I offer, words hesitant. “The King would make no such threat in a time of peace and prosperity for his kingdom. He would have no reason to, I assure you!”

“The Queen is prepared to do what is necessary to protect our kingdom,” she retorts, soft but sure. She closes her eyes, warm sun vibrant against unmarred skin. “As am I.” Metal hisses as diamond-crested steal unsheathes. The pale dawn gleams across the sheen blade, and rubies twinkle with sunlight. Ferocity gleams behind burgundy, and remorse flickers across her features.

“…And I will do the same,” I reply quietly, unsheathing my spear. It is worn and old, weathered by the journey I’ve endured. And yet, the blade still flashes as it falls through the air and I ready myself. Silence casts itself upon us, two warriors fighting to protect their kingdoms. I know this battle will test my skill — I have yet to defeat the renowned General.

But for Burmecia — for Freya… I cannot fail!

I make the first move, focusing my energy into a swirling wind. Ghostly dragons race past her, and she deflects them with ease. She charges hastily, feet nearly silent against the plush field. Ruffled flower petals stir around her as our blades clash, metal shrieking as it collides. I break the parry, leaping back into the air. My spear lurches, slicing through crisp air and she dodges with expert time. Suddenly,

blossom petals streak past her, and she winces as they cut across flesh. Flecks of red sparkle as they dissipate, and feet land elegantly beside my spear.

The swift General takes no delay; no sooner than released from the ground, my spear collides with hers once more, and she parries my offensive strike. Rubies flicker, pale green light erupting around the blade. It glows brilliantly, resonating stronger as the weapon meets mine. Steel pierces earth, and it explodes in a flash. Heated wind cuts through me, and I fall back from the skill. Before I can stand fully, the General is over me, sword slicing through the air on an offensive strike. My spear intercepts it, only just deflecting. Metal resonates, high-pitched and fierce across the battlefield. Wildly, I swing, heavy metal slicing through the air. The hilt of her sword collides with the polearm, and I suddenly hear her yelp.

I stumble back, gaining myself. She kneels, hand covering her eye. Blood trickles from her forehead, the gash leaking sticky read to her temple. Like sparkling rubies, droplets of blood seep between her fingers. I approach her, hoping the wound is not too great. Fierce garnet strikes me, and I hesitate as she stands.

“I must admit, this is the first wound I have received in battle, aside from minor flesh wounds,” she says, yanking fabric from the bottom of her cape. “Your skill is truly impressive.” I wait, allowing her to tourniquet the wound. She ties it beneath chestnut, the white fabric staining with crimson as it holds the blood back. I wish to speak to her — convince her that the war between us is unnecessary. And yet, it seems futile, words trapped within my chest as I watch her. Like stones that rest, nested at the bottom of my heart. She lifts the Save the Queen effortlessly, making the weight appear nothing despite the heaviness of the ornate weapon. I nod, acknowledging her readiness.

She charges me, the wound doing nothing to slow the determined General. Metal hisses as our weapons clash, and she pushes me back. I dodge a quick swipe, ducking as the blade whispers through the wind, and I leap. I hurl my weapon downward, and it cuts through the air. She readies her blade, and metal collides. My spear ricochets, clattering dully to the side. She smirks as I land, and I realize that she stands between me and my blade.

Desperate to regain the offensive, I quickly focus my energy. The Dragon Knight crest swells around her, and she cannot move away in time. Energy

swirls upward in a dragon’s form, lunging towards her. I rush to the side, breaking for my spear, and jumping back. Smoke erupts as the crest vanishes, and she stands once more. Sudden light bursts around me, and I recognize the Holy Magic from before. I focus, forcing eyes to linger on the charging silhouette. Metal catches the light, and I leap sideways to avoid it. It hisses as it digs into the dirt, blades of grass taking to the wind. A pant escapes my lips; I am still worn from the battle by the bay.

I stand readied; eyes fix on the General as she pulls the weapon to her side. A battle of equals — neither standing over the other. Her breath whispers in the wind, chest heaving with the battle, and my own match hers. Testing me, she paces, mail boots nearly silent on the grass. Our eyes are locked, fierce garnets shimmering with determination in the pale sunlight. With no warning, no hesitation, the sword bursts with light and the spell is cast. A shroud dampens my vision, thick black like the cover of nightfall. I struggle to keep my vision on her, footsteps nearing as she charges. Fingers delve quickly into my item pouch and I grab a small vial. The effects of the Remedy are instant, but not soon

enough. Futilely, I plunge my spear forward, knowing well that I cannot evade the attack.

“Forgive me!” she cries, and orange light bursts in my eyes. Fingers leave the forged polearm as the Climhazard meets its mark, and I fall like a withered leaf against an autumn breeze. The sound of metal clattering barely reaches my ears as my spear lands against dew-coated grass. My limbs ache and the breaths are heavy against my chest. Golden dawn streaks the battlefield, and I feel cold flecks of water against my cheek. I struggle to stand, all strength having left my body as I fail to support my trembling weight.

Her silhouette is vaguely visible in my vision, half erased by the blurred glare of sun. But diamond-crested steel is aimed, ready to plunge into my heart. Like the rubies against metal, her eye glistens, her glossy gaze striking me. Light glimmers on her cheek, and the General turns.

“…I can’t…” she whispers admitting defeat.

“And at the end of the scene, our dear General Beatrix cannot slay the filthy rat,” a voice says quietly, words drifting on the morning breeze. A tone of dissatisfaction laces within his voice, and he shakes his head. ‘For one who prattled on about her

own strength, I must say I am disappointed.' She is silent, and I can sense the conflict within her. Wind brushes us, tattered fabric swaying with the long blades of grass that tickle my face. He tisks, and she scowls at the taunting gesture. "Mercy is weakness."

I manage to stand, limbs shakily supporting my weight as I reach for my blade. A playful smirk slithers across pale lips, and fingers glide gently through silver locks as they ruffle in the breeze. Eyes flit to the General, knowing well that I am too weak to take this threat alone. Remorse flickers in her gaze, and she turns from me. But I cannot accept defeat… not for the sake of my homeland, of my kingdom… of Freya. The mage steps forward, footsteps noiseless as he approaches.

"I will not settle for pettiness spoil the plot of this act," he says coolly, and an icy gaze meets mine. Fair skin accents bright cobalt, the sun glistening wickedly across his ambitious stare. I swallow against the lump in my throat, readying my defenses. He raises his hands towards the sky, a bright aura swirling around him as he casts his first spell. A low boom rolls across the sky, indigo light suddenly streaking down. The Thundaga hits its mark, lightning streaking across my vision. Knees buckle,

and I fall to the damp grass. He chuckles lightly, and I raise my gaze towards him.

I jump back as he prepares another spell, just moving for the lightening to miss. I take to the wind, jumping above him. I thrust my spear downwards, pale sunlight flashing across the blade as it streaks downward. With elegant agility, he leaps backward from the strike, landing gracefully a distance away. A tuft of silver feathers sways gently in the wind, and he tosses wispy bangs from his eyes. Pale lips curl and his sardonic leer is poisonous against mine. Fury builds inside me, and I focus my energies into a dragon skill. Swiftly, I charge, wind swirling around me in the form of a fierce dragon. The mage's gaze crosses my own, and suddenly orange bursts around me. The flare erupts, a fiery haze clouding my vision as heated gusts cut across me. I fall, no longer able to support my own weight. Knees hit grass, and I struggle to keep my breath. Metal is weighty beneath my grasp, and breaths heave inside my chest.

"Allow me to exterminate this rodent once and for all," he says, and my fogged gaze lifts. His slender frame approaches, arrogant and powerful, and I attempt to climb to my feet. Weary legs fail to sustain me, and cool grass brushes my cheek as I

collapse. I can hear the footsteps, muted but heavy against the sun-stained earth. I will myself to stand, to move, to flee — but weakened muscles refuse to move.

“It’ll be the last thing you do!” Sun glares in my vision as I raise my eyes, and Beatrix skids to a stop in front of me. Her form towers over my defeated body, and for a moment, the mage hesitates. Eyebrows raise with piqued interest, and he studies the General in silence. Sunlight shimmers across the Save the Queen, glaring across hazed vision and I fight to remain conscious.

“I must admit I am surprised at you, dear General,” he taunts, resting a finger over his chin thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t expect such a loyal pet to betray its master.”

“No, Kuja,” she spits, viperously. Her tone is harsh, demanding — pleading. “I will not betray my kingdom. Nor will I betray my friend.”

“You would save him, knowing well that he would be undoing of your entire kingdom?” She is silent, mind contemplating the mage’s words. ‘Consider this: if you let him leave, he will return to Burmecia, and warn the vermin of your kingdom’s plans — the preemptive strike that could save it.’

Barely audible, a weary, distant breath escapes onto the morning breeze, alive with the scent of dewgrass and battle. “Would you still wish to spare such an insignificant rat?” he asks, intrigue settling on his features.

She knows his words have defeated her, but she is stubborn, determined for an alternative. Faintly, I catch a glimpse of maroon, bright and unwavering beneath the blaring sunlight. Her fierce gaze turns, striking the mage. He chuckles, the light sound shattering the slowing world around us. Weakly, I let my mind find him, eyes scrutinizing the mage from a distance; part of me is uncertain whether the mage warns her or mocks her.

“Perhaps a compromise, then?” An aura swirls around him, washing out his form in my foggy sight, and suddenly white bursts before my eyes. I hear a voice, a cry distant against the sun-warmed breeze. But I fade, my consciousness even now a distant memory. Weightlessness ensues, and my limbs feel numb and sore. Uncertainty flickers in my mind — why does my body ache?

But it is a distant thought, the heaviness of my own mind settling as the brightness fades, and I am surrounded by nothingness.

7. Epilogue: A Distant Memory

Author's Note: Well, the last of Fratley's tale. Thank you to my readers, and especially to those that reviewed. Just as a note, I am working on a sort of parallel fic to this one that would basically be Fratley's encounters between the first challenge of Beatrix and where we see him again in Lindblum. I have a few ideas I'm rolling on, but I haven't actually started anything. On another note, I am in the plannings for another IX fic, so keep an eye out if you're interested in more of my stuff for FFIX. I hope you enjoyed the story, and thanks again SO much for reading and reviewing!

NaomiK

Epilogue:
A Distant Memory

The road to Alexandria had been treacherous. If she'd thought the trek through the Mist had been difficult, she had underestimated scaling the plateau to reach Alexandria castle. But airships no longer bartered for transportation, and the North Gate had

long since closed. And Evil Forest had not been an option; make no mistake, she never underestimates her skill. However, blindly wandering through a forest where none had escaped had seemed foolish.

Stories of his victories were evident. She'd heard of his dragon slayings, and rumors of his triumphs. Valleys yielded no sign of him, only distant footsteps to trace and only whispers of the strange Burmecian. And it seemed as though he'd vanished for nearly a year — no traces, no footsteps, no rumors… She had recently picked his trail back up from a pair of Qus in a marsh just south of Gizamaluke's Grotto who had seen him journey south; toward Lindblum for the Festival of the Hunt, no doubt. And indeed, she last heard of his feats in Lindblum, learning from an old friend that he'd gained passage to the quiet castle mere months earlier. Freya gives a half-hearted laugh at herself; it seemed no matter where she went, she was always a step behind her Fratley.

It was here, in the kingdom of Alexandria, that he'd sought the General Beatrix, whose skill he believed better than his own. Perhaps she would know of Sir Fratley's whereabouts. Vaguely, a memory creeps to her mind, nearly two years past. The first time she glimpsed the rose sunlight

glimmering over the sword through Alexandria castle. Upon her first venture to the kingdom, many moons ago, she'd been shooed away by an arrogant knight, a captain, so he claimed; but she would not accept a kind dismissal this time.

A warm summer sun beams down across the sandstone walk way, bustling with busy townsfolk and eager vendors. She crosses the square, hesitating only to locate the castle bay. She can see the magnificent sword, pierced through the heart of Alexandria keep, and towering over the rest of Alexandria. Hastily, she passes under the arches, the cobbled path taking her to a nearly empty bay. Alexandrian soldiers keep watch, and she approaches as the pair exchanges uncertain looks.

"This bay is closed," the brunette says sternly, eyes scrutinizing the Burmecian.

"I wish to see General Beatrix," she replies, equally firm.

"Perhaps you misunderstood," the other soldier says. "The bay is closed."

"You will take me across to see the General," Freya snaps. "The matter is urgent." The guards

exchanged glances, hesitance slipping between them.

“Queen Brahne has expressly forbidden —”

“I don’t much care what the Queen has requested,” she spits stubbornly and the pair look taken aback by the sudden interruption. ‘If I cannot cross, then bring the General to me.’ The pair falter, unsure how to deny the request. “Or I’ll cross myself.”

“…One moment,” the dark-haired soldier says, turning to the other. Whispers hiss between them, the pair discussing the matter quietly. Finally, she turns. “Wait here. I will see if the General has time to meet with you.”

“That’s what I thought,” Freya replies cockily. “Tell her I am looking for a Burmecian called Sir Fratley — a Dragon Knight.” The soldier nods, silently agreeing to relay the message. The boat drifts across, water gently rippling as it breaks the surface. Freya watches her go, catching the stare of the other guard who suddenly finds interest in the scuffed bricked path. Impatiently, she sits, cross-legged on the sun-warmed steps.

“Excuse me, General,” she interrupts, and a maroon eye flits to the doorway. “Might I have a moment?” My gaze falls back to the Princess, who busily finishes adjusting the formal white dress.

“Please excuse me, Princess,” I say, and the young Princess Garnet nods. “I’ll be only a moment.” The soldier turns, and I follow her to the door. It closes silently behind me, and I turn to my subordinate.

“Sincerest apologies for the interruption,” she begins, saluting hastily. “But we have a, er… situation at the bay.”

“What is it?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“A Burmecian,” she replies, and my heart flutters.

“…Burmecian?” I repeat distantly, and she nods affirmatively. “…What seems to be the problem?”

“She’s demanding to see you,” she answers quickly. “We told her the bay was closed by orders of Queen Brahne, but she refused — even threatened to come over here herself if we failed to produce you.”

“…Did she say who she was?” I ask; she shakes her head.

“No, ma’am,” she replies. “Only that she was looking for another Burmecian — a Dragon Knight.”

“A Dragon Knight?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she retorts, nodding. She stammers to recall the Burmecians request, clearly not expecting I would inquire of her intent. “I believe the name was… Frat… Fratley?”

“…Sir Fratley…?” I repeat distantly, the name stirring a flutter in the pit of my stomach. It occurred many months ago, but the memory is fresh, like a dream that plagues my mind. No… not dream. A nightmare.

“It’ll be the last thing you do!” I raced to his side, skidding to a stop as I placed myself between them. My face throbbed with the painful wound I’d received, but my gaze is fierce. He hesitated, eyebrows raising with piqued interest, and marine eyes studied me in silence. Sunlight shimmered across the Save the Queen, flecks of sunbeams catching on rubies as I held my blade to the ready.

“I must admit I am surprised at you, dear General,” he said, his tone taunting and arrogant as he rested a finger over his chin thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t expect such a loyal pet to betray its master.”

“No, Kuja,” I spat, fiercely. My gaze didn’t leave him, the fiendish red mage; my queen might have trusted him, but my heart disagreed. “I will not betray my kingdom. Nor will I betray my friend.”

“You would save him, knowing well that he would be undoing of your entire kingdom?” I hesitated, uncertain; he was my friend, but… my kingdom… ‘Consider this: if you let him leave, he will return to Burmecia, and warn the vermin of your kingdom’s plans — the preemptive strike that could save it.’ Barely audible, a weary, distant breath escaped onto the morning breeze, alive with the scent of dew grass and battle. “Would you still wish to spare such an insignificant rat?” he asked, intrigue settling on his features.

I knew I was defeated but there must have been an alternative to death. My gaze caught over the fallen Burmecian, the Dragon Knight I had known as a friend; in a role such as mine, friends were few, trust hard to gain. I turned back to Kuja; our eyes

met, mischief glimmering across sapphires and part of me knew I couldn't take the mage alone. But I won't allow death to come to Sir Fratley! He chuckled, the light sound shattering the slowing world around us.

"Perhaps a compromise, then?" An aura swirled around him, shuddering against the morning breeze, and suddenly bright white engulfed us. It faded, and a quiet groan escaped his lips; I turned quickly, studying the Burmecian. He stirred quietly, my heart nearly stopping as I realized he still lived. My mouth ran dry, gaze gaping and unsure. Finally, his eyes opened, glazed and weary as they tried to focus.

"Who… where am I…?" he asked quietly, and brows furrowed as I realized the results of his spell. "Who… who…?" His voice was weak, and I was uncertain if he could decipher our figures against the early morning sun.

"What… what did you do?" I questioned, words almost a whisper among the breeze. He chuckled, the cold response sending shudders across me.

"It's a simple spell," he replied. Unable to support his own weight, the Burmecian crumpled, head lolling to the side. His eyes struggled to remain open, fluttering beneath the warm morning sun.

“The rodent will no longer remember the events he has witnessed.”

“Who… who am… I…?” he whispered, the words faint and undirected.

*“You… erased his memory…” I realized. Sir Fratley murmured weakly, his consciousness fading once more. Eyes closed quietly, flickering back open like a feigning candle. ’*A fate worse than death*…’ I thought to myself.*

“Precisely,” he said, airy syllables like rose petals against the breeze. “Unless, of course, you’d rather I finish the deed.” Wind swirled behind me, and I turned sharply as Kuja prepared his spell.

“Kuja, let him be!” I protested, and hands fell to his side with mock disappointment. “He cannot even recall his own name — he’s no longer a threat.… You’ve done enough.” The wind settled, a stillness sinking over us and I could feel the indifferent mage studying me, eyes boring deep into my core.

“Mercy is weakness,” he reminded me, turning back to the kingdom. Footsteps were elegant, body moving as though it were gliding across the tall blades of grass and fresh clover. “You will never be truly powerful so long as you pity the insignificant.”

Glazed eyes lingered on my silhouette, resting somewhere between a garnet iris and the heavy air between. A last word fell incoherently against the grass, and I turned. Absently, I followed the mage, smothering the sickness that swelled inside my stomach. My wounded eye throbbed painfully, and an ache pierce my heart; but I allowed for neither to show.

Fingers graze my silver eye patch, lingering across the smooth surface as I brush the bangs from my face. Silently, I pass the soldier, stepping onto the balcony. I can see her, just barely visible against the sunlit dock. A red cloak, adorned with the crests of Burmecia and the Dragon Knights draped over her neck, she sits cross-legged, waiting. The bay shimmers between us, and I sigh quietly. My subordinate studies me from behind, knowing better than to ask what troubles me. I swallow, mouth suddenly dry as a familiar ache burns within me.

“Tell her this,” I say, words quiet but unwavering. “The knight she seeks… is dead.”

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